

THE LAST SUPPER

by
Joachim Jeremias

*A paper read on 20 Sept. 1948
at a joint meeting of the Birmingham Free Church Theological Society
and the Birmingham Diocesan Clerical Society.*



Published in
The Journal of Theological Studies Volume 65-L ; issue 1 ;

1949

I begin with the question: was the Last Supper a Passover meal?

As is well known, our four gospels differ in their account of the date of the Last Supper. According to the three synoptic gospels, the Last Supper took place on 15th Nisan (day beginning with sunset) and it was the solemn Passover meal, the climax of the religious year. According to the fourth gospel, however, the Last Supper took place twenty-four hours earlier, at the beginning of 14th Nisan, and it was an ordinary meal. Which date is right?

First, I make three negative points.

1. The view is widely held that the Johannine chronology is right and that the Last Supper was a Kiddush-meal. The word Kiddush or K'dushshah means 'sanctification'. And the Kiddush is a blessing of only a few words, spoken at the beginning of every sabbath and festival day. The earliest information that we have about the Kiddush is the following, R. El'azar bar Çadok born at Jerusalem about A.D. 35) said: "Abba {my father, the famous Rabbi Çadok} used to say over the cup: '{Blessed be he} who has sanctified the sabbath.' He did not add a concluding benediction." [1] These few words, spoken over a cup of wine after sunset at the beginning of the sabbath or the feast day and inseparably connected with the beginning of the holy day - that is the Kiddush. A Kiddush spoken on an ordinary day (as 14th Nisan was) is quite impossible. And all contentions that the Kiddush was a meal or a sacrifice or a custom of messianic circles or anything other than a blessing are pure fantasy.

2. Another widespread theory which also tries to justify the Johannine chronology is the contention that the Last Supper was a *chaburah* meal.

But here again, it must be said, we meet a contention without any basis in our sources. *Chaburah* means "society, circle". And it is true that we hear of *chaburoth* and of meals which the members attended. But these *chaburoth* were *chaburoth miçwa* [2] that is, circles concerned with the performance of commandments, probably Pharisaic circles, and the meals in which they joined were circumcision-meals, engagement-meals, wedding-meals, burial-meals, meals, in short, attendance at which, and financial support of which, was esteemed religiously meritorious. Other meals of these *chaburoth* are nowhere recorded and all contentions concerning them are without foundation in our sources.

3. In recent times attempts have been made to settle our problem with the help of astronomical chronology [3]. In New Testament times the calendar was fixed empirically in Palestinian Judaism. The new moon cannot be seen, only the new light one or two days later as a thin line in the western sky a short time after sunset. Now, on the 29th of every month the calendar commission of the priesthood gathered at the temple of Jerusalem and waited for witnesses, who could confirm by oath that they had seen the new light. As soon as these arrived, the new month was proclaimed by fire-signals throughout the whole country. As astronomical chronology enables us to ascertain on what days and at what hours the new light was visible at Jerusalem, we can reconstruct the Jewish calendar with a high probability. Thus we can say in which years round about A.D. 30 the 14th or the 15th Nisan fell on a Friday. The answer is that, the year 27 being too early and 33 too late, we may be tolerably sure that the Lord was crucified on Friday 7th April 30 and that this day was most probably the 15th Nisan. So the Last Supper would have been a Passover meal. But unfortunately we cannot be quite certain. It is still possible, although unlikely, that the Friday was 14th Nisan. If the atmosphere had been misty at the beginning of the month, the new light would have been seen one day later and Friday the 7th April 30 would fall on 14th Nisan.

We must therefore try another way. I put before you eleven observations, all pointing in the same direction.

1. Jesus held the Last Supper in Jerusalem. This was by no means natural. Jerusalem was in New Testament times a city of about 25,000 inhabitants. There was no accommodation for the 100,000 pilgrims coming from the whole world to the Holy City. Most of them lived in tents in the Upper Kedron valley or in the villages round Jerusalem. So we hear that during these last days Jesus left the overcrowded city in the evening and went out to Bethany. Why then did he hold the Last Supper in Jerusalem ? It was a religious duty to eat the Passover lamb within the walls of Jerusalem [4], even though in the courtyards or on the roofs of houses [5].
2. The Last Supper is an evening meal extended into the night. It is quite certain that the usual time of supper was in the afternoon, from 4 to 5. Only festivals like wedding meals were extended into the night. How was it that the Last Supper took place at an unusual hour? According to Exodus 12 the Passover meal was to be held after sunset—the only family meal of the whole year which was an evening meal.
3. Jesus was at table with the twelve disciples. Is it purely an accident that only here is the small number of those present recorded ? As far as we can see from the gospels the usual number was greater. Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias for instance are recorded as having been in the company of Jesus from the time of John the Baptist till the ascension. And we miss the women who accompany Jesus. Why this small number ? Josephus and the Talmud agree in reporting that a Passover *chaburah* comprised on the average ten members.
4. Jesus and his disciples are reclining at table. Again, we know that this was not usual. People used to sit at table except at festival meals. Why then are they reclining ? At the Passover it was a religious duty that all should recline at table as a symbol of liberty.
5. A dish precedes the breaking of the bread. This is astonishing. How unusual it was for a family meal, may be illustrated by the following example. In Exodus 12 and 13 it is prescribed that the children should be instructed about the meaning of the Passover festival. To fulfil this command the children "were told to put questions after the first dish about the peculiar features of the meal. To these the father answered by a sermon, the so-called Passover Haggadah. One of these questions, put by the children, is, according to the Palestinian Talmud: Every day we dip into the plate with bread, why this evening without [bread] ? This question shows clearly that the Passover meal was the only family meal throughout the year when a dish preceded the breaking of the bread.
6. They drank wine at the Last Supper. This again is not natural. Wine was drunk only on festival occasions such as weddings and sabbath meals. Usually one drank water. How modest the usual meals of Jesus and his disciples were, is to be seen from the story of the feeding of the multitude: some loaves of bread and some fishes as relish formed all their rations. On the eve of the Passover, however, the drinking of four cups of wine was a religious duty—even for the poorest man of Israel and even if he had to procure the wine from the *Tamchuj* (the public organ of social relief) [6].
7. As the comparison of the wine with the blood shows, red wine was drunk. In Palestine there was in New Testament times, as the Talmud reports, white, red, and black wine. For the Passover it was a command to drink red wine.
8. When Judas went out some of the disciples thought *that he should give something to the poor*. Was Jesus accustomed to order that gifts should be distributed in the middle of the night ? For such an idea could only be suggested by a normal custom. On the night of the Passover this idea of the disciples is intelligible. It was a religious duty to do good to the poor at the Passover. Hence it often happened, we hear, that someone was invited from the street to partake of the Passover meal. Further, the doors of the Temple were opened, not as usual at dawn, but at midnight; and surely Billerbeck [7] is right in assuming that on this occasion beggars were not lacking there.
9. The meal closes with a hymn. This can only mean the second part of the Hallel (Ps. 114-18), with which the Passover meal closed.

10. After the Last Supper Jesus did not return to Bethany. This was according to the Passover regulation. Though it was a duty to eat the Passover lamb within the walls of Jerusalem, it was permissible to spend the night outside the walls but within a determined area of greater Jerusalem. Bethany was outside, the Garden of Gethsemane inside, this area.

11. Jesus announces his suffering by comparing the bread with his body, the wine with his blood. This last point seems to me to be decisive. How can one explain why Jesus should choose this strange way of announcing his suffering? Again I can only see one answer. The expounding of the symbolical meaning of the elements of the meal was an important part of the Passover ritual. The head of a household who in his Passover Haggadah had not explained the Passover lamb, the unleavened bread and the bitter herbs, had not fulfilled his duty. The four cups of wine, for instance, were explained as a symbol of the four liberations of Israel or of the four afflictions coming over the enemies of God's people. So Jesus took over a feature of the Passover meal when he explained the bread and the wine as his body and blood.

All these eleven considerations indicate that the Last Supper was the Passover meal. The fact that most of them are mentioned quite incidentally in the gospel narrative reinforces this conclusion.

But an objection may be raised. Was it possible that all the events of the twenty-four hours from the beginning of the Last Supper to the burial of Jesus took place on a high Jewish festival ? The following ten events have been declared incompatible with the Halakah of the festivals :

1. The walk to Gethsemane on the night of the feast.
2. The carrying of arms.
3. The session of the Sanhedrin and the condemnation to death.
4. The high priest's rending of his garments.
5. The participation of Jews in the Roman trial.
6. The coming of Simon of Cyrene ἀπ' ἀγροῦ.
7. The execution.
8. The buying of the linen by Joseph of Arimathaea.
9. The taking of the body from the cross, the burial, and the rolling of the stone to the door of the tomb.
10. The preparation of spices and ointments.

Here we must distinguish carefully.

1. Five of these ten arguments, namely, 1, 2, 4, 9, and 10, are erroneous and should never be repeated. For example, the carrying of arms was allowed, according to the older Halakah, on the sabbath and on feast days [8], and the rending of the garments on hearing a blasphemy was a duty also on these days [9].
2. Two of the arguments, namely, 5 and 7, concern ordinances of the Roman authorities: the Roman trial and the execution.
3. One argument, 6, is based on arbitrary assumptions. If it is said that Simon of Cyrene came ἀπ' ἀγροῦ, does it sound very probable that he came from working in the fields at 9 o'clock in the morning? ἀπ' ἀγροῦ can also mean 'from a farm'; Simon may have dwelt outside the walls of the city and may have been coming to attend the morning service at the temple, if he was a Jew. But was he a Jew ? Simon is also a common Greek name. If he was not a Jew, the feast day did not concern him at all.
4. So there remain only two objections, 8 and 3, which deserve our consideration. The first is the buying of the linen by Joseph of Arimathaea. I leave aside the fact that this purchase is only recorded by Mark and may be an erroneous expression on his part. The Mishnah says

shortly and clearly in the Halakah about sabbath and festival days: It is forbidden to buy and to sell. But inevitably exceptions were allowed for the dire necessities of life. Thus it might be necessary to obtain some food on the sabbath; this was possible on condition that the money was not paid on the feast day. Instead a garment was pawned, making the matter technically a loan not a purchase. Another such necessity arose in the case of a death, especially if, as in the Passion according to the synoptic chronology, there followed a sabbath after a feast day so that two holy days came one after the other. Owing to the hot climate burials take place in Palestine on the day of death, so that one could buy coffin and linen as the *Tosephtah* expressly states; only it was forbidden to fix the price [10]. Thus the record of the purchase of the linen is quite correct.

The second objection which deserves consideration, 3, concerns the session of the Sanhedrin and the condemnation of Jesus to death. Again the command is quite clear and short : It is forbidden to judge on feast days. This difficulty affects not only the synoptic chronology, as is generally assumed, but also the Johannine, for it was also forbidden to judge on the day before a feast. But in the case of Jesus there intervened an ordinance of the Torah itself. In a few cases of heinous crimes Deuteronomy commands that the death sentence should be published as a deterrent; as it says: *And all Israel shall hear and fear*. All the people being gathered only at the three pilgrim festivals (Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles), this commandment was interpreted by the Rabbis to the effect that, in spite of the prohibition of executions on festivals, in these few special cases enumerated in Deuteronomy the death penalty must be carried out at the feast.

One of these cases was that of a false prophet. Jesus being a false prophet in the eyes of his adversaries, his condemnation had to take place immediately, in order that the execution could be carried out on 15th Nisan. For only on this day were the people assembled; on 16th Nisan people were allowed to return home, unless it was a sabbath.

So we must state, in agreement with Dalman and Billerbeck, that not one of the events from the Last Supper to the burial of Jesus was incompatible with the festival Halakah [11].

It remains, however, to ask how the origin of the Johannine chronology is to be explained. At first sight it seems that in St. John's gospel, in which the Lord's last meal takes place on the evening before the Passover, the connexion between Passion and Passover is severed.

In fact, however, as has been rightly and vigorously maintained in recent discussions of the subject [12], this connexion thereby receives increased emphasis. For the ante-dating of the events of the Passion by twenty-four hours results in the Lord's crucifixion coinciding temporally with the slaughter of the Paschal lambs. While these were being slaughtered by the hundred in the Temple, the true Paschal Lamb, of whom by God's will no bone must be broken, died unrecognized before the gates of the city. The comparison of Jesus with the Paschal lamb, which, as we shall see, probably goes back to the Lord himself, is of great importance in the fourth gospel. It may have been the vital significance of this comparison which, in the branch of the tradition followed in St. John's gospel, had as its result a (probably unconscious) change of recollection with regard to the date of the events of the Passion.

Our conclusion that the Last Supper was a Passover meal is by no means only of archaeological and chronological interest but of the highest importance for the true understanding of the *Heilsgeschichte* (the method of our salvation). The connexion between the old and the new covenant, between promise and fulfilment, is seen in a new light, if the Last Supper was a Passover meal; and in particular the Lord's utterances during the Last Supper are, I am convinced, only to be understood in this light, as I now attempt to show in a shorter second part.

I pass therefore to my second question:

What is the meaning of the words of Jesus during the Last Supper ?

I first make three statements about the text.

First, our chief texts about the Last Supper are liturgical texts.

Accordingly they do not tell us everything that happened, but only what was of interest to the worship of the primitive Church.

Secondly, comparison of the texts makes it most probable that the Marcan text is the oldest. For instance, Mark has many Semitisms which in the Pauline text are avoided, or altogether missing, such as the words τὸ ἐκχυννόμενον ὑπὲρ πολλῶν.

(a) In Aramaic the participle is atemporal. The tense is always implied from the context. There can be no doubt that ἐκχυννόμενον (Aramaic: mishtephekh) has a future meaning. It cannot therefore be translated "which is shed for many" ; it must be translated "which will be shed". This point has very far-reaching implications in eucharistic dogma.

(b) In the Indo-European languages the word "many" has an exclusive meaning. Many is a part, not all; some are excluded. But the Hebrew *rabbim* and Aramaic *saggi'in* have often though not always an inclusive meaning: the many, the great number, the innumerable multitude. So in this case, where Isaiah 53 is cited, the meaning of πολλοί is inclusive, not exclusive: which will be shed for many, for the nations, for all (cp. 1 Tim. 2. 6 with Mark 10. 45).

Thirdly, it is most probable that there existed a pre-Markan primitive form of the words of Jesus. The words τὸ αἷμα μου τῆς διαθήκης cannot be retranslated into Aramaic, for in Aramaic a noun with a personal pronoun τὸ αἷμα μου cannot be followed by a genitive.

So τῆς διαθήκης may be an interpretative expansion dating from the first decade after the death of Jesus.

Let us now consider the utterances of Jesus themselves.

First, τοῦτο ἐστὶν τὸ σῶμα μου.

τοῦτο ἐστὶν τὸ αἷμα μου τῆς διαθήκης τὸ ἐκχυννόμενον ὑπὲρ πολλῶν.

Our starting-point must be that σῶμα / αἷμα obviously form a wordpair.

Now if we examine all the word-pairs of which blood is one member in the Biblical and Talmudic literature, there is only one which fits, the Hebrew *basar wadam*, in Aramaic *bisra udema*. This word-pair has a cultic significance. It denotes the two components of the slaughtered animal. Hebrews 13. 11 : For the bodies of those beasts, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the High Priest for sin, are burned without the camp. Therefore Jesus is speaking of himself as a sacrifice. Each of the two words "body" and "blood" by itself implies slaughtering. Jesus compares himself with the Passover sacrifice. It is true that the Passover sacrifice as carried out year by year was not an atoning sacrifice, its blood had no atoning effect.

But this was not true of the first Passover, slaughtered in Egypt.

According to the Midrash, God said : I see the blood of circumcision and the blood of the Passover, and I reconcile you [13]. Again: By the atoning force of this blood, they were redeemed in Egypt and they will be redeemed in the days of the Messiah [14]. It is this eschatological Passover sacrifice with which Jesus compares himself. By the atoning force of his sacrifice he inaugurates the final redemption; and by the distribution of bread and wine he gives his disciples a share in the atoning force of his sacrifice.

Here we must remember that our texts are liturgical texts, not complete records of all that Jesus said. In the preceding Passover Haggadah he must have already explained the elements of the meal ; thus the disciples were prepared for the association of bread and wine with his body and blood ; it was not so unexpected for them as it is for us. We may further remember that the identification of Jesus with the Passover is attested from the earliest times: it occurs

not only in 1 Peter, John, and the Apocalypse, but also in a very old pre-Pauline Passover Haggadah [15], 1 Corinthians v, 6-8.

Secondly, τοῦτο ποιεῖτε εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν.

The commandment to "do this" occurs only in St. Paul and the longer text of Luke; it was no part of the old liturgical text. But this in itself does not necessarily imply that it is not authentic. For rubrics, directions for liturgical action, are not recited, but carried out – as Pere Benoit has rightly pointed out [16]. The authenticity of the words therefore can only be determined by exegetical considerations.

(a) τοῦτο cannot mean the repetition of the words of institution, for ποιεῖτε looks to an action. Therefore τοῦτο ποιεῖτε can only refer to the acts of breaking the bread and blessing the cup by which the fellowship of every meal was constituted.

(b) This fellowship of the Messianic community is continually to be re-constituted for a purpose - εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν. By whom is the Lord to be remembered ? By the disciples ? This is strange.

Does he fear that they may forget him ? Now there is a formula parallel to εἰς ἀνάμνησιν, viz. εἰς μνημόσυνον, which occurs twice in the New Testament. In Acts 10. 4 the angel tells Cornelius that his prayer and alms are gone up εἰς μνημόσυνον before God. The words mean that God remembered him. Again, in Mark 14. 9 it is said of the woman who anointed Jesus: "This also that she hath done shall be spoken of εἰς μνημόσυνον αὐτῆς". Very probably the sense is here the same : that God may remember her. Further, this is also the meaning of the formula in the newly discovered Chester-Beatty fragments of the Ethiopic Book of Enoch [17]. We may therefore almost certainly take εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν as meaning: that God may remember me. God's remembrance has always a special meaning in the Bible; it is never a matter of mere bringing to mind, but always, when God remembers, he acts, he does something, he shows his grace, he fulfils his promises: "He hath holpen Israel his servant, that he might remember mercy, as he spake unto our fathers", Luke 1. 54.

How then does God remember, when the Messianic community gathers together and prays that God may remember his Messiah? There is only one answer - by the eschatological fulfilment, by the Parousia.

It is this remembrance of which the Didache speaks: "Remember, Lord, thy Church . . . and gather it from the four winds" 10. 5.

If this is the meaning of the command "do this", it is only fitting in Jesus' own mouth. It is the commandment of Jesus that during the short time before the final victory, his disciples are to gather themselves together as the Messianic community so that God may remember his Messiah—by the Parousia.

Thirdly, there remains to be considered Jesus' declaration that he will no more eat of the Passover or drink of the fruit of the vine "until the Kingdom of God shall come".

This is a vow of abstinence. This appears from the linguistic point of view (ἀμήν and οὐ μή being formulae of oaths) as well as from the context. Although Jesus himself blesses the cup, he passes it to his disciples, saying "Divide it among yourselves". He does not drink himself, and he comments on his abstinence with the words : "For I say unto you, I will not drink."

Vows of abstinence were common in New Testament times. They were used to express an irrevocable decision, or to reinforce a prayer, or to sanctify oneself for God. Jesus renounces future festival celebrations in order to show his disciples how sure he is that the time of fulfilment has come, that God's Kingdom is very near. Jesus is going to the cross. His sacrifice is the beginning of the last tribulation coming over the οἰκουμένη. But all this is only the beginning of God's final victory. Then, at the eternal Passover of redemption, Jesus will again act as host, breaking the bread and distributing the wine, he always giving, and his disciples always receiving—receiving of his fulness, and grace for grace. It is to impress this certainty upon his disciples as strikingly as he can, that Jesus, contrary to all custom, hands

the cup over untouched, and renounces all further festivals, thus sanctifying himself wholly to God.

Here we have reached the central purpose of all that Jesus said and did at the Last Supper. When he gives his disciples a share in his sacrifice by bread and wine, when he commands them to assemble "in remembrance of me", when he renounces all further festival celebrations, his one intention is this : to give them assurance as impressively as possible. As certainly as they eat the bread and drink the wine, so certainly will they be included in the "ὕπερ πολλῶν" for whom his sacrifice is offered, and in the "μεθ' ὑμῶν" of the Messianic community on the renewed earth [18].

JOACHIM JEREMIAS

Notes :

1. Tos. Ber. iii. 7 (Zuckerman 6. 22 ff.).
2. Sanh. viii. 2; b. Pes. 113b; Tos. Meg. iv, 15 (Zuckerman 226, 13 ff.).
3. O. Gerhardt, Der Stern der Metiat, pp. 124 ff.; K. Schoch in Biblica 9 (1928), pp. 48-54; J. Schaumburger in Biblica 9 (1928), pp. 62ff.; O. Gerhardt and K. Schoch, pp. 464 ff.; O. Gerhardt in Astronomische Nachrichten, Band 240 (Okt. 1930), pp. 137-62; 242 (1931), p. 127 f.; pp. 305-10; letter of 21 May 1944 from Prof. Gerhardt to the author.
4. Siphre Num. 9, 10 § 69 (ed. princ. Venedig 1545, iob 29).
5. Tos. Pes. vi, 11 (Zuckerman 166, af.).
6. Pes. x. 1.
7. Kommentar zum N.T. und Talmud und Midrasch, II (1924), p. 842 f.
8. Shab. vi, 4.
9. Shab. xiii, 3.
10. Tos. Shab. xvii, 13 (Zuckerman 137, 14); b. Shab. 151 a.
11. If it be urged that Mark 14:1 is itself evidence against this view, the reply is that ἐορτή here, as in Plotinus Enn. 6, 6, 12, probably has the well-attested meaning 'festal crowd', and that Μὴ ἐν τῇ ἐορτῇ is parallel to the ἅτερ ὄχλου of Lk. 22:6. In that case Mk. 14:2 does not give a note of the time, but of the conditions, in which the arrest should be made. It has indeed long been recognized that the emphasis of the whole sentence is on the words ἐν δόλῳ, and this accords well with the interpretation of Μὴ ἐν τῇ ἐορτῇ just offered.
12. E. Gaugler in G. Deluz—J. Ph. Ramseyer—E. Gaugler, La Sainte Cène (1945), p. 58f.; Th. Preiss, Le dernier repas de Jésus fut-il un repas pascal ? in Theologische Zeitschrift 4 (1948), pp. 81-101; Franx-J. Leenhardt, Le Sacrement de la Sainte Cène, Neuchâtel—Paris (1948), p. 11 f.
13. Ex. R. 15, 13 (on Ex. xii, a) ed. Stettin 1864, 35 b, 26.

14. 'Im Verdienste des Bundesblutes der Beschneidung und des Passablutes habe ich euch aus Aegypten erlost und in ihrem Verdienste werdet ihr .erldst werden am Ende des vierten Weltreiches (d.h. in den Tagen des Messias)', Pirqe R. Eli'ezer 29 (14 d).

15. If it is a fact, that the comparison of the Lord with the Paschal lamb goes back to Jesus himself and that 1 Cor v. 7 c only repeats this companion, then it is no longer admissible to bring forward 1 Cor. v. 7 c as an argument in favour of the Johannine chronology.

16. Revue biblique, 48 (1939), p. 386, "On ne recite pas une rubrique, on l'execute".

17. J. Jeremias, Beobachtungen zu neutettamentlichen Stellen an Hand des neugefundenen griechischen Henoch-Textes, Z.N.T.W. 38 (1939), p. 116 f.

18. A complete statement of the argument in this article, with fuller references, may be found in the author's Die Abendmahlsworte Jesu, second (completely revised) edition, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1949. [Editor, jf.T.S.]